

THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF NASSER'S EGYPT

A Study of Demagogues in Power

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WESTERNERS have long taken it for granted that Communism, in the Middle East as elsewhere, must necessarily begin as a revolutionary force from below, directly caused by widespread poverty or the denial of equal rights to the masses; that economic aid, industrial development, and "nationalism" are the best antidotes to Communist influence in "backward" countries; that Communism and Fascism are mutually exclusive doctrines; that Arab nationalism and similar movements constitute a response to colonialism and will disappear along with foreign domination; and that the slogans used by these movements have the same meaning as they do in the West. Yet an empirical study suggests that Nasser's regime in Egypt (like nationalism in the Arab world generally) is mainly the product of internal political and social conditions rather than a reaction against Western imperialism.

The new order in Egypt is primarily a creation of the officers' corps, and it is thus impossible to understand the character of Nasserism without first appreciating what the Egyptian officers' corps represents. Until late in 1952, just before the military coup that deposed Farouk, British Middle Eastern experts still expected the army to restore the king's power and prestige, and concomitantly strengthen Egypt's ties with England;

THE subject of Arab nationalism has been discussed in the pages of COMMENTARY before by several different writers, but in this article by A. V. SHERMAN a somewhat new approach is taken. Mr. Sherman, who combines journalistic experience with sociological training, was born in England and has worked in various capacities in Israel since 1952. Here he considers the Nasser regime in terms of its social origins.

even after the revolution, they (and their opposite numbers in many other countries) had no doubt that the officers would institute a solidly pro-Western and anti-Communist regime. After all, who had ever heard of Communist army officers—except perhaps in Russia itself? The miscalculations of the experts arose from their failure to recognize that the officer corps occupied a special place in Egyptian society, and that this difference in status made for attitudes which seem quite extraordinary from any Western point of view.

Professional army officers in most Western and Central European countries form an integral part of a more or less organic upper class that includes bankers, industrialists, landowners, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the higher civil service, important politicians, and many intellectuals and professionals (university professors, writers, newspaper editors, etc. etc.) The officers not only share the outlook of this class, they are tied to it concretely by family and social relations, by a common background and way of life. In Egypt, as throughout all the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, no such integrated upper class emerged, owing partly to the fact that the commercial, industrial, and property-owning classes—along with many intellectuals and professionals—were not Moslems, but Jews and Christians, as well as members of various ethnic groups (Armenian, Syrian, Lebanese, Greek) which had no inner relation with Islam.

These communities had no ties of family, education, or social background with the dominant Moslem-Arab group, or indeed with one another. Politically, they had always been passive, helpless before their Moslem rulers, dependent on protection either from these rulers or from foreign

powers: in fact it might be said that for them the class struggle took the form of bribery. The tradition of struggle—with the bourgeoisie playing a prominent role—for political and social equality, which has been so important in shaping Western notions of personal and property rights, had no counterpart in Egypt. The country's slow rate of industrial development hampered the growth of an entrepreneurial stratum, and concepts of property rights and human rights alike were so much intellectual baggage brought into Egypt from the West and never really naturalized.

The new Egyptian officers corps, then, was drawn not from a cohesive and conservative upper class but from what might be called the "lower intelligentsia," that is, people whose education raised them above the level of manual or agricultural labor, but who fell below the intellectual standards of qualified professionals, technicians, and administrators. The great majority of this group came from lower-middle-class Moslem families—their fathers were petty government officials, policemen, small shopkeepers, fairly well-to-do peasants—and their only road to advancement was through education, which they often acquired at great personal sacrifice. Between 1920 and 1950 the number of secondary school graduates rose at an annual rate of over 30 per cent, while the number of university graduates (most of them equipped for no particular job) climbed almost as rapidly.

This overcrowding of the educational facilities, of course, took its toll in quality. Indeed, anyone who comes into contact with the run-of-the-mill secondary school and university students in Egypt cannot help being struck by their superficiality and brashness, their feelings of inferiority, their lack of any capacity for self-criticism, their addiction to self-pity, and their emotional instability. These traits are as marked in their personal and family life as in their political behavior.

The educational boom also took its toll of the Egyptian economy, which had expanded too slowly to absorb so many new white-col-

lar workers. Despite the over-staffing of the civil service, and despite the promulgation of decrees that limited the hiring of non-Moslems by commercial and industrial concerns, unemployment among secondary school and university graduates had run into five figures by the 1950's.

THUS there came into being a large new class of young people—ambitious, narrow-minded, devoid of deep-rooted cultural traditions, disappointed in their hope of advancement through education, and bitterly resentful of the greater wealth and prestige of other groups (the great landowners, the rich merchants and manufacturers, the well-established professionals). This resentment, which had once taken the form of Moslem puritanism, was soon to find new expression in "radical" philosophies, first "right," then "left."

When, upon the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty in 1936, the Egyptian army began a major expansion program, it was forced to draw most of its officer cadets from this new class of secondary school graduates, since the military career did not as a rule attract the landowning group, while non-Moslems had no tradition of military service. A year and a half at a free military school was irresistible to many young men who had neither means nor inclination for a full course of university study that held out no assurance of a good job at the end. (Nasser himself, the son a postal clerk from the provinces who was sent to stay with relatives in town while going through secondary school, is a fairly typical example of this new officer class.)

As officers, such young men had little respect for the monarchy, which had failed to bring their country prestige and self-esteem, and which never gave them the pay, promotion, equipment, or glory they thought they deserved. In their political feelings, they were no more inhibited than other members of the lower intelligentsia by those conservative loyalties which have always characterized the thinking of European army officers. There was nothing in their

background or in Egyptian political traditions—and certainly not in their own personal interests as politically ambitious soldiers—to oppose the idea of rule by the military or to resist state appropriation of public and private economic resources.

When the officers first staked their claim to a place in the sun, they turned naturally to nationalist xenophobia, denouncing those in power as foreign stooges—this gave them a common language with the masses, who hated non-Moslems—and presenting themselves as the true spokesmen of the people. At one time they revealed a certain readiness to take over the slogans and organizational methods of the Nazis and Italian Fascists. (Nasser was drawn to the Italian-sponsored "Greenshirts" while still at high school, and Colonel Anwar Sa'adat—currently the number three man of the regime—boasts of his former pro-Nazi activities.) The Axis stock in trade of military glory, anti-Jewishness, and hostility to the Western democracies was very attractive—but the defeat of the Axis brought this infatuation to an end.

THE officers were able to take power in 1952 without firing a shot because there was little left to overthrow. They advanced no clear policies or program, only announcing that after they had removed the king and his corrupt cohorts, "rejuvenated" the country, introduced "honor," honesty, and progress together with all "men of good will," they would surrender their power to the proper authorities and return to their military tasks.

But finding themselves risen from obscurity to the unopposed mastery of a country with a population of twenty millions, together with its cotton fields, factories, banks, two great cities, as well as the Suez Canal and international strategic importance—or at least nuisance value—the officers underwent a change of heart: the politicians were surely unfit to have such power handed back to them; it was *their* duty to be the permanent rulers of Egypt. But to safeguard their position on top, they had themselves to become politicians. The task before them was to

bring into line existing social forces, find allies and supporters inside the country, destroy the political and economic bases from which potential rivals could operate. Then to maintain the morale of their supporters, they had to gain victories of the kind that would raise their prestige. These were the factors which defined the effective aims and nature of the new regime.

Their allies the officers found among the radical intellectuals (whom they used to help set up their political organization), a few industrialists who saw a chance for easy pickings in the new order, and some members of the old bureaucracy.

The radical intellectuals included outright Stalinists, fellow-travelers of different shades, supporters of various Egyptian and foreign Fascist movements, and a politically ambitious wing of the Moslem Brotherhood. As a whole, this group was the ideological representative of the lower intelligentsia. Many were unpublished writers, unemployed lawyers, out-and-out bohemians and dilettantes; what united them was resentment against the status quo and readiness to back any political movement promising them good jobs and prestige. That their main loyalty was to their newly found careers made them congenial collaborators of the junta, whose political principles could be defined with equal simplicity. Faced with the prospect of well-paid and important positions in industry, government, propaganda, publishing, and education, few of these intellectuals found it difficult to convince themselves that the junta was worthy of support. And they found it even less difficult to believe that their working inside the regime, if only for the purpose of "steering it in the right direction," was the surest guarantee of its future soundness.

The intellectuals provided policies and techniques for the *Gleichschaltung* of other elements, for arousing public enthusiasm, and for insuring a strong base of popular support for the junta. Out of the interplay between their Egyptianized version of methods and ideas they had picked up from Fascist and Communist countries in Europe, and

the needs of the new order as seen by the officers, the regime began to take shape. Beginning ostensibly as a temporary "trusteeship" designed to restore popular sovereignty, it turned in the space of three or four years into a tightly knit dictatorship. The new constitution promulgated by Nasser in 1956 was merely the formal expression of this state of affairs.

IN THE field of propaganda the new order (which effectively controls all the media of communication) showed itself capable of applying up-to-date techniques with considerable success. Its propaganda agency—in which Stalinists and former members of Goebbels's staff work amicably together—operated simply by telling the people more or less what they wanted to hear. And this, after all, was precisely what the propagandists themselves were eager to believe—that Egypt was an important world power, the acknowledged leader of the Arab peoples, the Islamic world, and Africa. The stature of Egypt had thus far not been fully recognized only because of oppression and exploitation by the imperialists—the British in particular—and because of corrupt and traitorous rulers. But from now on, under a great and devoted leader, Egypt would assume its rightful position in world affairs, respected and feared by the "other great powers."

The junta had no long-range economic policy, though it very soon learned the importance of telling Western visitors (who expected a new regime to justify itself by inaugurating economic reforms) what they wanted to hear. The junta also quickly discovered that extensive propaganda about its determination to solve the country's economic problems achieved the same (and perhaps better) political results both at home and abroad as the successful implementation of actual concrete plans. Nasser and his cohorts believe that if they devote their energy to establishing Egypt as a significant force in world politics, they will be able to extract far more in loans and gifts from the United States and Russia than Egypt could

earn by economic progress, while if they fail to make Egypt a prize to be wooed, no amount of economic progress will keep them in power.

The one definite item of economic policy proclaimed by the junta when it first obtained power was land reform—an idea which had long been bandied about in Egypt as a panacea and which was originally invoked by the regime in order to obtain the support of the peasantry. A scheme of land reform that provided for additional capital to expand agricultural production, instead of subsidies to help the individual peasant pay his rent, could have been economically beneficial, for Egypt's main problem in this area was not inequitable distribution of land but rural over-population and under-capitalization. However, redistribution of land had the advantage over such a scheme of being easy to understand and of catering to a black-and-white picture of economic life.

Yet for all that, it soon disappeared from the domestic, if not the international, propaganda of the regime. The poor Egyptian peasant or landless rural laborer is not a political factor to be reckoned with seriously: he has never been known to revolt, he does not demonstrate, he is infinitely submissive and manipulable so long as he remains in his native village. Every Egyptian government for the past century has begun by expressing a determination to do its all for the peasant, and has ended by placing fresh burdens on his shoulders. By contrast, twelve thousand landowners who owned more than 50 acres—the figure first fixed by the land reform plan as the maximum holding permitted to an individual—constituted an important political force indeed. The maximum holding was soon raised to 200 acres, and the whole scheme was further eroded by other concessions to the large landholders. All in all, some five per cent of the total cultivated land has been redistributed since the revolution. The other economic plans announced by the regime in its early programmatic period were equally futile and even more expensive.

Those sections of world opinion whose

interest in Egypt was aroused only after the military revolution of 1952 are unaware that most of the advances claimed by the regime in health, elementary education, transport, irrigation and drainage, agriculture and industry, and social services were actually made by previous Egyptian governments. Between 1922 and 1950, 250 village clinics were founded, and the number of general hospitals in Egypt rose from 19 to 100. Similar progress in elementary education was achieved over the same period. Rural social centers (for which the junta loudly claims credit) were founded in 1939, when provision of clean water for northern Delta areas was also undertaken.

The energy devoted to establishing Egypt's power and "glory" has itself become a factor limiting the regime's freedom of economic maneuver, since it eats up what surplus might otherwise be available for dealing with the real problems of the economy. Government expenditure in general has been increasing rapidly. Military appropriations have risen both absolutely and in terms of their proportional share in the budget and national income. An estimated £E3 million is being spent on propaganda publications, and another million goes for radio broadcasts (not counting heavy expenditure on bigger and better transmitters). Even this budgeted expenditure does not give the full picture, since there is reason to believe that the funds for various political and secret activities at home and abroad are drawn directly from other sections of the budget, or from public and commercial institutions under the control of the junta.

Egypt now broadcasts in sixteen languages, including Somali and Swahili; there are, in addition, hundreds of publications circulated inside the country, all saying more or less the same thing, lavishly turned out and most of them heavily subsidized. The armed forces alone publish a couple of dozen periodicals—each arm, service, and corps has its own. This profusion of publication uses up funds, paper, and printing facilities (all of which are in short supply), but it has the advantage of giving the editorial staffs, con-

tributors, and their friends a feeling of participation in the regime.

The junta now conducts an extensive operation aimed at influencing the political life not only of the other Arab states but also of countries in North and East Africa. This involves financing political movements in many places, periodically bringing the active members of these movements to Egypt, providing scholarships and teachers "to increase mutual understanding," etc., etc. It all adds up to more millions of public money, in a country where most of the inhabitants still cannot afford a pair of shoes.

EVEN before the new regime came to power, Egypt, like so many of its neighbors, suffered economically from the fact that too high a share of the meager national income was taxed or otherwise taken away from the producers, and used not for investment but to support an unjustifiably large administration, police, and army. This was the classic pattern of the Ottoman Empire, where a military-bureaucratic caste traditionally exploited the nation. The junta, far from breaking with the past in this respect, has removed all restraints on the tendency to expand bureaucracy at the expense of investment.

In the brief span of five years, a new ruling class has virtually been created, with its own source of income—the state—and its own ideology—Nasserism. At the top of the pyramid are the junta itself, their closest civilian advisers, the higher military command, the cabinet and its committees. Directly below this level come the regular army and police officers; the thousand or so army officers now in charge of civilian posts (where they enjoy salary, prestige, and other advantages far above what they previously had); the staffs of the large political and propaganda apparatus as well as of the bureaus for "Arab affairs," "African affairs," and "Islamic affairs" (Nasser's equivalent of the Cominform); the members of the new state economic directorates; the managers of state-owned or -controlled economic enterprises of one kind or another; and various other sec-

tions of the lower intelligentsia who have been drawn into the regime's activities on a salaried basis.

It was this new ruling class which overthrew Naguib and carried Nasser into power when a rift occurred between the two men over the issue of restoring Egypt to a constitutional system. Naguib, who had been brought up under the sway of traditional ideas, wanted the officers to relinquish dictatorial power as soon as possible—which would, of course, have weakened the position of the new ruling class. Despite Naguib's greater personal prestige and character, Nasser had the overwhelming majority of the cadres behind him in rebuffing this threat to their new-found status. Indeed, the only real backing that Naguib found was among the aristocratic cavalry (armored corps) officers, who had enjoyed wealth and high social position before the revolution, and who were disturbed by the elevation of the lower intelligentsia to new dignity.

To maintain its power and its high level of income, the new ruling class must continually find fresh sources of revenue. Even before the Suez crisis, Nasser had expropriated (or announced his intention of nationalizing) some £E25 million worth of foreign and Jewish capital invested in Egypt. Much of this was turned, or was destined to be turned, into cash to cover current government expenditure. Since the Sinai campaign, the regime has speeded up the "Egyptianization" of the Canal company, of foreign-owned banks and insurance companies, and of Jewish property. It has also managed to gain the controlling interest in many Egyptian firms, including Bank Misr (the big industrial bank which controls important textile, food, and other industrial concerns). But these confiscations and nationalizations mean a decrease in the amount of property that can be taxed to provide for current expenses, and the regime is therefore forced to search for new sources of income.

In short, though the junta began without any marked ideas on economic policy or social systems, its political needs, and those of

the class it created, led it to statism and dictatorship. It soon began to mend its theory to match its practice.

WHEN they first came to power, the officers had no clearly defined attitude to Communism or to the Soviet Union. The USSR had the virtue of being anti-Western. As for the local Communists, they were rivals for power, though not very dangerous. But with the consolidation of one-party rule, it became clear to the junta that elements of Stalinist ideology, and certain Stalinist techniques and slogans, could be of use in Egypt. It was to "mature" Communism—the creed of a ruling bureaucracy rather than the doctrines of revolutionary Marxism—that the officers turned, finding in it lessons on how to operate a one-party state, how to build and justify a cult of the leader, and how to manage the paraphernalia of economic propaganda. They borrowed a whole range of arguments from Communist "anti-imperialism" to vindicate their fanatical anti-Westernism both to their own more sophisticated citizens and to non-Moslems in Asia and the West, who found crude Moslem xenophobia unpalatable.

Soviet military and political aid to Egypt (which began in 1955 with the arms deal) heightened the general pro-Russian character of the regime's propaganda more than simple expediency might have dictated. Nasser, eager to build up the self-confidence of his notoriously unstable followers, shied away from telling them that Soviet aid was forthcoming because of considerations internal to Soviet foreign policy, and that the Russians might well reverse themselves with a changed situation. Instead he presented this aid as the expression of Russia's realization of the justice of Egypt's cause and her value as an ally. Soviet life and policies came to be painted in glowing colors in Egyptian publications, while the West was hysterically denigrated to a point where the Egyptian press and radio became almost indistinguishable from those of the "people's democracies."

The Russians, for their part, revamped the

propaganda they had been directing to the Middle East since 1949, removing those elements which had formerly repelled the Moslems (internationalism, the mystique of worker and peasant, economic welfare, rationalism, and "anti-Fascism"), and stressing instead the value of rule by an elite and the cult of the leader, nationalism, militarism, and hatred of the "imperialist" West. Though Nasser is confident that he is only making use of Communism and the Soviet bloc for his own ends, there is no certainty that Communist ideology will not eventually get out of hand. The younger generation in Egypt is being brought up under a barrage of pro-Soviet propaganda—an atmosphere most congenial to the half-educated young Egyptian, since it enables him to find the answers to all questions and to prove that everyone else is a fool and a rogue, merely by learning a few formulas and slogans.

VIEWED from this standpoint, certain widely held assumptions about Nasserism go by the board. It seems unlikely that a more "sympathetic" attitude on the part of the West, greater pliancy in the face of Egyptian nationalist demands, a less pro-Zionist attitude, and better propaganda about Western aims would have helped cut the ground from under Nasser's xenophobia. After all, why should an ambitious young officer or "white collar proletarian" whose claim to eminence can only be justified by his nationalism and anti-Westernism, give them up merely because some Western propagandist tells him that they are based on misconceptions?

As early as 1953, an Arab analyst of Middle Eastern affairs, Albert Hourani, said that the political pattern of the old

Ottoman Empire—where power rested with a military caste which was served by a bureaucracy and legitimized by a class of professional ideologues—seemed to be re-imposing itself on Egypt and Syria. And indeed, the old Ottoman pattern, which had apparently been destroyed beyond repair by the impact of Western ideas and techniques on Egypt, has shown itself capable of absorbing many elements of Western influence without breaking down in the process.

But whereas the old Ottoman ruling class was satisfied with holding on to the levers of power and taxation and could leave its subjects to their own devices, the Nasser regime cannot allow any centers of organized social activity to remain outside its direct control. Concentrations of independent economic power on a modern scale would of themselves tend to exert a dangerous political influence. Again, free competition in the sphere of ideas would threaten the regime, since its grip on the nation is maintained partly through ideas. If every question is politically significant, every decision must be vested in the leadership; otherwise rival centers of power might be created. The old Ottoman pattern, then, has been modified in Egypt by the absorption of modern Western elements, but primarily to the extent that a *modern* military-bureaucratic dictatorship must inevitably tend toward total social organization—that is, totalitarianism. Within the present constellation of world forces, such tendencies naturally lead to the assimilation of Stalinist techniques. Though Egyptians see nothing incongruous in praising both Hitler and Stalin—both were good totalitarians—it is Russia which has remained the living source of the totalitarian idea.